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ABSTRACT

This survey of 85 parents of children with handicaps (ages 14-25) assesses the involvement of parents in the transition process of the young person from home to work or independent living, the kind of involvement they desire, and responsibilities they would be willing to assume in order to be involved. Findings show that although more than one-third of parents were without transition programs, nearly two-thirds were involved or were anticipating involvement in some type of program. Significantly more parents wanted to be involved with the transition team and have an equal part in decision making than had the opportunity to do so. Virtually all parents desired involvement. Parents also indicated that they had preferences for their child's postschool life, relating to not living at home, working in the community, and earning a wage equal to or greater than the minimum. A copy of the survey questionnaire is included. (10 references) (JDD)

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Parent Involvement in Transition Programs

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Professionals in various education and rehabilitation disciplines often comment on the importance of parents to the success of education programs and indicate that in the absence of special funding or special projects, the single most important factor in successful transition is the parent. However, there is little information about how parents have been and can be involved, or what parents perceive their role(s) to be.

Much work has been done regarding parent perceptions of educational programs. McDonnel (1987) found that parents were satisfied with the quality of special education instruction and the overall program offered by local schools. Myers and Blacher (1987) found parents were satisfied with their child's special education teacher, school personnel, and the school program in general. Epps and Myers (1989) found that parents were satisfied with school teaching across the four educational domains (domestic, community, vocational, and leisure). Yet they report that 45% of parents anticipate "employment" (the authors use this term in its broadest sense) of their transition-aged sons or daughters with severe handicaps in an adult day program, 15% in sheltered employment, and only 3% in part-time employment. No mention was made, however, of whether or how parents were involved in a transition program, or the basis of their perceptions.

Schwartz (1970) describes interactive strategies used by mothers involved in the medical care system. She found that the parents she interviewed tended to adopt one of three roles: they are active questioners or passive acceptors, or they withdraw from the system. It seems that in the transition process, parents can assume three similar roles: facilitator, nonparticipant, or difficult parent. As facilitator, a parent contributes to the transition team as an integral team member who is willing to make some kind of commitment (e.g., receive training, attend meetings, assist in finding vocational placements or living arrangements) in order to maximize his or her involvement (Wehman, Kregel, & Barcus, 1985). As

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nonparticipant, the parent gives those working with his or her child a free hand in transition plan development and implementation. For example, Hill, Seyfarth, Orelove, Wehman, and Banks (1985) found that parents indicated satisfaction with the current program placements of their children regardless of how normalized the placement was or the quality of the work life it offered. This is similar to the findings of Epps and Myers (1989), who reported that parents are satisfied with the education or transition program independent of the expected employment or independent living outcome. These parents do little more than sign the transition plan. This is by no means a value judgment of this group, because circumstances sometimes prohibit involvement.

The difficult parent opts for outcomes other than those recommended by the transition team, perhaps because of a past disagreement with one of the members of the transition team, the results of the intense stress at the time of transition (Cole, 1985), or philosophical differences. The work of Hill, Seyfarth, Orelove, Wehman, and Banks (1985) supported the third of these potential problems when they found that parents may not agree with the transition team about the importance of work itself in the adult life of a person with handicaps. At the same time, however, it is important to point out that one person's difficult parent is another person's advocate. Without professionals to take the lead, the parent may be the only defense against inappropriate goals and outcomes.

Unfortunately, many transition programs may have avoidance of the difficult parent as their only goal. This is not to imply that they embrace either of the other two types of parents; they merely avoid the third type. Obviously programs based on this strategy of interaction with parents cannot be expected to be successful in acquiring optimal levels of involvement.

Assuming that parent involvement is important to desired transition outcomes (integrated employment, independent living, and just options in general), researchers need to address more specifically how to facilitate parent involvement. A good starting point would be to assess the current profile of parent involvement in transition programs,

including the percentage of clients and their parents being served, the type of involvement and roles that parents are assuming in the transition process (Schutz, 1986), and how this profile matches up with the involvement desired by parents. Additionally, researchers should determine how involvement has affected parent projections for the future (Seyfarth, Hill, McMillan, & Wehman, 1987). It was the goal of this study to look at these issues.

In this study, parents were asked what their involvement had been in the transition process, the kind of involvement they would desire, and responsibilities they would be willing to assume in order to be involved. It is hoped that this information will provide (a) an indication of how parent desires for involvement are being addressed, and (b) an indication of parents' satisfaction with transition involvement.

Methodology

Survey Sample

The survey sample consisted of 200 families across the United States who had a son or daughter with handicaps in the age range from 14 to 25. The sample was identified by the Ohio Coalition of the National Parent CHAIN (Coalitions for Handicapped Awareness and Information Network). The Ohio Coalition contacted the other eight regional coalitions (California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, Texas, and Washington, DC) and asked each office to identify approximately 20 families within their region who met the criterion for inclusion in the sample. These names were then forwarded to the Ohio Coalition.

Survey materials were assembled and coded by the authors and sent to CHAIN where an introductory letter was included, names were coded, and the survey mailed. During this time, the authors remained in close contact with the CHAIN staff. Two weeks after the first mailing, a follow-up letter was sent to nonrespondents encouraging them to respond. Completed packets were then returned to the authors.

Questionnaire

Basic demographic information and information about parent involvement in transition programs was collected (see Table 1). In preparing the questionnaire, a question regarding program involvement was included as a means of comparing the experiences of respondents in transition programs. Respondents could reply to the question, "Which of the following describes your son's (daughter's) involvement in a program to help him (her) to make the transition from school to independent living or work?" by checking one of the following: (a) will be involved in a program, (b) is currently involved in a program, (c) has completed a program, or (d) there is no program that I know about. These four groups provided the basis for several comparisons.

Other questions addressed whether parents had a plan in mind for their child once they left school, the kind of information parents felt they needed to make the best decisions for their offspring's future, whether they had been contacted by the school to plan for transition, and their knowledge of adult services. A large portion of the survey concerned the involvement that parents had had in programs and the type of involvement they would like or be willing to have in programs.

In order to compare expected and desired outcomes more specifically, parents were provided with 11 statements relating to their son's (daughter's) post-school life and asked to respond to two questions about each statement. First, they were asked "What do you imagine your son/daughter will be doing once his/her education is completed?" and second, "What would you like to see your son/daughter doing once his/her education is completed?" These and other questions provided a framework for an analysis of parent involvement in transition programs.

Table 1

Selected Parent Survey Items Related to Parent Involvement in Transition Programs
(Questions 1-24 relate to demographics and therefore are not included in this table.)

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25. Have you been contacted by your son's/daughter's school to plan for his/her transition to independent living or work once they have finished with school?

    _____ Yes _____ No

26. Do you have a plan in mind for what your son/daughter will be doing once he/she has finished with school?

    _____ Yes _____ No

27. Do you know what adult services are available in the community for your son/daughter once he/she is finished with school?

    _____ Yes _____ No

28. Do you feel that you have been an important part of the team planning for the transition of your son/daughter from school to independent living or work?

    _____ Yes _____ No _____ As far as I know there is no team

29. What do you imagine your son/daughter will be doing once he/she is finished with school? (Check all that apply.)

    _____ Living at home
    _____ Living in a group home
    _____ Living in his/her own apartment
    _____ Working a sheltered workshop
    _____ Earning less than minimum wage
    _____ Earning more than minimum wage
    _____ Living in the community
    _____ Living in a state institution
    _____ Holding a job in the community
    _____ Not working at all
    _____ Earning minimum wage

30. Please check each of the following that would help you plan for your son's/daughter's life once he/she has finished with school. (Check all that apply.)

    _____ More information about your son's/daughter's school
    _____ More information about your son's/daughter's skills
    _____ A better understanding of your son's/daughter's options for work in the community
    _____ A better understanding of your son's/daughter's options for independent living in the community
    _____ Increased financial support for your son/daughter once he/she has finished with school
    _____ Increased emotional support and encouragement from your family
    _____ Involvement in a parent support group
    _____ More information about adult service agencies
    _____ Increased professional support (from teachers, doctors, clergy, etc.)
    _____ Other (please specify)_____
    _____ I do not think I need any help

31. What would you like to see your son/daughter doing once he/she is finished with school? (Check all that apply.)

    _____ Living at home
    _____ Living in a group home
    _____ Living in his/her own apartment
    _____ Working in a sheltered workshop
    _____ Earning less than minimum wage
    _____ Earning more than minimum wage
    _____ Living in the community
    _____ Living in a state institution
    _____ Holding a job in the community
    _____ Not working at all
    _____ Earning minimum wage

Table 1 (Continued)

32. Which of the following describes your son's/daughter's involvement in a program to help him/her to make the transition from school to independent living or work?
    - _____ Will be involved in a program (go on to question 35)
    - _____ Currently involved in a program (go on to question 34)
    - _____ Has already completed a program (go on to question 33)
    - _____ There is no program that I know about (go on to question 35)

33. If your son/daughter has already completed a transition program, what is he/she doing now? (Check all that apply.)
    - _____ Living at home
    - _____ Living in a group home
    - _____ Living in his/her own apartment
    - _____ Working in a sheltered workshop
    - _____ Earning less than minimum wage
    - _____ Earning more than minimum wage
    - _____ Living in the community
    - _____ Living in a state institution
    - _____ Holding a job in the community
    - _____ Not working at all
    - _____ Earning minimum wage

34. What kind(s) of involvement have you had in programs assisting your son/daughter with the transition from school to work? (Check all that apply.)
    - _____ A member of the transition team
    - _____ An equal partner in decision making
    - _____ Involved in finding potential job placements
    - _____ Involved in finding potential community living arrangements
    - _____ The person who makes all the final decisions
    - _____ A resource person who is called upon only if needed
    - _____ No involvement
    - _____ Other (please specify)_____

35. What kind(s) of involvement would you like to have in programs assisting your son/daughter with transition from school to work? (Check all that apply.)
    - _____ A member of the transition team
    - _____ An equal partner in decision making
    - _____ Involved in finding potential job placements
    - _____ Involved in finding potential community living arrangements
    - _____ The person who makes all the final decisions
    - _____ A resource person who is called upon only if needed
    - _____ No involvement
    - _____ Other (please specify)_____

36. In order to be most involved in the transition process, I would be willing to
    - _____ Attend weekly meetings
    - _____ Attend monthly meetings
    - _____ Take some training to learn more about transition
    - _____ Help to solve logistical problems (like transportation)
    - _____ Assist in the training of other parents
    - _____ Participate in training groups with other parents
    - _____ Participate in support groups with other parents
    - _____ I would rather leave it up to professionals (teachers, rehabilitation counselors, etc.)
    - _____ Other (please specify)_____

37. Does your son/daughter have a job right now?

    _____ Yes _____ No

Data Analysis

Frequencies were generated for each of the survey items. Respondents were then divided into the four groups mentioned earlier based upon their transition program involvement experience. Significant differences among the groups were determined with Student's t-tests and analyses of variance.

Data were considered missing if a question mark was placed on a response blank rather than a check, if two marks were made for a question requiring only one, or if the respondents created and checked her own category.

Results and Discussion

Of the 200 surveys sent, 108 were returned. Of these, 85 were completed correctly and met the criteria for inclusion (offspring between the ages of 14 and 25). Surveys were received from 22 states. Most respondents (51%) lived in suburban areas, 19% were urban, and 27% were rural. Virtually all of the respondents were white (99%), and all surveys were completed by the mother of the child with handicaps. Mothers' ages ranged from 34 to 62 with a mean of 47, and fathers' ages ranged from 36 to 72 with a mean of 49. Twenty-five percent indicated that high school was the highest educational level achieved; 62% indicated college experience. Sixty-two percent of the parents had annual incomes of more than $30,000, and 24% had incomes of $20,000 to $30,000. Eighty-nine percent of families were two-parent families, 87% were married, 1% single, and 9% divorced.

In 62% of the cases, there were either three or four persons living in the household, with 72% having three or fewer children. In 59% of the families only one person worked full time; in 31%, two persons worked full time; and in 33%, one person worked part time. (In 52%, no one worked part time.) Ninety-four percent indicated a religious affiliation, and 61% considered themselves regular church attenders (6% often; 27% seldom; 6% never). Eighty-eight percent had only one child with handicaps and that child was most often the firstborn (45%) or secondborn (21%). Twelve percent had more than one child with handi-

caps. Finally, 56% of the offspring were male and 44% were female. Ages of the offspring with handicaps ranged from 14 to 25 with a mean of 18.6.

Offspring Characteristics

Parents were given a list of handicaps and encouraged to check all handicapping conditions that applied to their child. Therefore, parents may have checked learning disability and sensory impairment, for example, in reference to a single child. The most frequently checked responses were learning disability, physical handicaps, and moderate mental retardation.

Seventy-four percent of parents considered their child as healthy, and 63% stated their child appeared physically normal. Five percent of persons with handicaps had received special education services for 0-5 years, 32% for 6-10 years, 40% for 11-15 years, and 23% for 16-21 years.

Expected and Desired Post-School Outcomes

Parents were asked what they thought their child with handicaps would be doing once school was completed. In 63% of cases, parents had a plan in mind for what their son or daughter would be doing after the school years.

Independent Living

Table 2 shows that although more than 50% of parents expected their child to live at home once his or her schooling was completed, significantly fewer than that number desired this arrangement. Also, although only marginally significant, it was indicated that though few parents imagined their child would have his or her own apartment or live in the community, in each case parents felt these were desirable outcomes. None of the parents imagined or desired institutional placement as an option.

Vocation

There were no significant differences between the percentage of those who imagined their child would work in a sheltered workshop and those who desired this outcome. In each case these groups were represented by less than a third of the parents, perhaps

Table 2

What Parents Imagine Their Adult Children Will Be Doing Upon Their Completion of Schooling Compared With What They Would Like Them to Be Doing (N=85)

	Which of the following do you imagine your son (daughter) will be doing once he (she) is finished with school? %	Which of the following would you like to see your son (daughter) doing once he (she) is finished with school? %	Significance of difference
Living at home	54.8	25.6	0.0001
Living in a group home	28.6	37.8	0.16
Living in his (her) own apartment	28.6	42.7	0.06
Living in the community	27.4	41.5	0.06
Living in a state institution	0.0	0.0	1.00
Working in a sheltered workshop	28.6	20.7	0.24
Holding a job in the community	48.8	67.1	0.02
Not working at all	7.1	0.0	0.01
Earning less than minimum wage	22.6	1.2	0.0001
Earning minimum wage	26.2	27.2	0.89
Earning more than minimum wage	26.2	54.9	0.0001

indicating parents want more normalized outcomes. When one looks at the responses to the next statement, "Hold a job in the community," it appears that this may indeed be the case. Although only 50% of parents imagined their child would hold a job in the community, a significantly greater number of parents desired this outcome. This contention was further supported by the importance parents placed on wages as a desired outcome. The responses to three statements about wages (earn less than, more than, or the minimum wage) demonstrated that to a significant degree, parents (a) do not desire their children to earn less than minimum wage, (b) appear satisfied with the earning of minimum wage, but (c) would like their child to earn more than the minimum wage (statistically significant at the 0.05 level).

When asked to indicate the types of information that would help parents plan for their son's (daughter's) postschool life, 40% indicated more information about their son's/daughter's skills, 66% indicated more information about work options, 37% wanted more information about community living options, and 56% wanted more information about adult service agencies. Other kinds of assistance parents felt would be helpful were increased financial support, 35%; increased emotional support from their family, 20%; involvement in a parent support group, 24%; and increased professional support, 48%.

Transition Program Involvement

A comparison was made of transition program involvement experience and desired involvement in such programs to gain insight into parent satisfaction with involvement. Among the seven variables tested, several significant differences were found (see Table 3). First, parents were significantly less involved in transition programs than they desired. Nearly 70% desired involvement, whereas slightly more than 30% experienced involvement. Second, significantly more parents desired to have an equal part in decision making than were given the opportunity to do so. Third, although 12% indicated no involvement experience with the transition team, less than 2% indicated that they desired no involvement.

Table 3

Actual Transition Program Involvement versus Desired Transition Program Involvement (%).

	What kind(s) of involvement have you had in programs assisting your son (daughter) with the transition from school to work? (Groups 2 & 3, n=32) %	What kind(s) of involvement would you like to have in programs assisting your son (daughter) with the transition from school to work? Groups 1,2,3 & 4, n=85) %	Significance of difference
A member of the transition team	33.3	68.0	0.001
An equal part in decision making	54.5	78.7	0.01
Involved in finding potential job placements	37.5	54.7	0.11
Involved in finding potential community living arrangements	31.2	49.3	0.09
The person who makes all the final decisions	28.1	21.3	0.76
A resource person who is called upon only if needed	12.5	16.0	0.65
No involvement, I would rather leave it up to the professionals (teachers, rehabilitation counselors, etc.)	12.5	1.3	0.01

Parents also indicated that they wanted to be involved in finding job placements and community living arrangements more often than they had the opportunity to do so, although this was only marginally significant. As an aside, the authors suggest that particularly in regard to securing vocational placements, parents may be a largely untapped resource. Professionals often are new to a community or do not live in the community in which they are working. They may also have recently completed their education or have been educators and are therefore out of touch with the business world. Parents therefore may have greater success, or know of significantly more opportunities for employment within the community simply because they may have lived and worked in the community all their lives. Additionally, parents appear to desire a part in finding independent living arrangements for their children. Clearly professionals are particularly amiss if they do not recruit and encourage parent involvement in these areas.

Then, although fewer parents wanted to be the final decision maker than found themselves in that role, the difference was not significant. This was also the case for a small percentage of parents wanting to act as a resource. There was no significant difference between the percentage desiring that role and the percentage experiencing the role.

Program Involvement Options

Parents were then provided with four options from which to select their transition program involvement. Twenty-one percent (n=16) indicated they will be involved in a program (Group 1), 28% (n=22) indicated that they were currently involved (Group 2), 13% (n=10) indicated they had completed a program (Group 3), and 38% (n=29) indicated that they were unaware of any program (Group 4).

Analysis of variance indicated some significant differences among the groups. The ages of the children in Groups 1 (mean 16.3 years) and 4 (mean 16.9 years) were significantly different from Groups 2 (mean 20.1 years) and 3 (mean 22.7 years) at the .05 level. This may indicate that the children of parents in Group 4 are as yet too young to be involved in a transition program, offering hope that although parents reported knowing of no programs,

there may be one for them in the future. Second, members of Group 2 had spent significantly more time in special education services than those of the other groups. Members of Groups 2 and 3 had been contacted significantly more often than those of Group 4 by the school to enlist their involvement with the transition team which perhaps indicates that the school contact affects parent involvement, that is, parents infrequently initiate contact with the transition team, or more obviously that if there is no program, there is no contact. There were no significant differences between program involvement groups based upon handicapping condition. In other words, people with a variety of handicapping conditions were generally equally represented across the four groups.

As stated earlier, 63% of parents had a plan in mind for what their child would be doing once school was completed. It was also observed that parents involved in a transition program (Groups 2 and 3 vs. Group 4) were significantly more likely to have formulated a postschool plan for their son or daughter with handicaps. This finding may suggest that when parents are involved in a transition program, they will have a greater interest in the future of their offspring or at least may be provided with information, as evidenced by their forming a postschool plan.

Another significant difference was noted between parents' perceived knowledge of adult services. Groups 1 and 2 felt more aware of community adult service options than did Group 4. There was no difference between Group 3 and the other groups, possibly indicating that although parents anticipating program involvement or currently involved in a program may feel knowledgeable about adult services, once they are involved with them, they find they know less than they had thought. There was obviously a greater transition team involved for Groups 2 and 3 than for Group 4, and finally, a significantly greater percentage of persons who completed a transition program (Group 3) were employed than those who had not completed a transition program (Groups 1 and 4).

As indicated in Table 4, there was only one significant difference among the four groups regarding what parents imagined their son or daughter would be doing once he or she was

Table 4

Group Percentages Compared on the Question, "What do you imagine your son (daughter) will be doing once he (she) is finished with school?" (Check all that apply)

	% Group 1 (n=16)	% Group 2 (n=22)	% Group 3 (n=10)	% Group 4 (n=29)
Living at home	43.8	54.5	50.0	65.5
Living in a group home	31.3	36.4	40.0	24.1
Living in the community	43.8	22.7	20.0	20.7
Living in his/her own apartment	31.3	18.2+	70.0	13.8+
Living in a state institution	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Working in a sheltered workshop	43.8	36.4	10.0	24.1
Holding a job in the community	43.8	45.5	70.0	41.4
Not working at all	6.3	0.0	10.0	10.3
Earning more than minimum wage	25.0	27.3	50.0	13.8
Earning minimum wage	37.5	18.2	50.0	24.1
Earning less than minimum wage	31.3	18.2	10.0	17.2

+ = Significantly less than Group 3.

Group 1 = Will be involved in a transition program.
Group 2 = Currently involved in a transition program.
Group 3 = Have completed a transition program.
Group 4 = There is no transition program that I am aware of.

finished with school. Parents in Group 3 were significantly more likely to think that their child would be living in his or her own apartment once schooling was over than were parents in Groups 2 and 4. This result is difficult to interpret in regard to Group 2, especially when one considers that the age difference between the groups is so small. One potential explanation is that perhaps transition teams do not begin actively seeking independent living arrangements until the final year of the transition program. Therefore, parents in Group 2 would not be aware of or involved in finding placements until that final year.

Another area explored what parents would be willing to do in order to be involved with the transition team. Specifically, parents responded to the question, "In order to be most involved in the transition process, I would be willing to...." by checking as many of the eight statements that followed, characterized the kinds of commitments they would be willing to make (see Table 5). To slightly varying degrees, parents indicated that they would be willing to make each of the commitments listed. Responses were then separated according to the four groups described earlier, and it was found that parents generally were in agreement among the groups about the varying involvement responsibilities. In fact, the only statistically significant difference was between Groups 3 and 4 in regard to the variable, "Assist in the training of other parents." This finding is not surprising, as parents who had completed a program were more willing to provide training than those who were not even aware of a program. One other variable was particularly worthy of note. Only 1.2% (one parent) indicated that she "would rather leave it up to the professionals." In other words, virtually all parents wanted to have some kind of involvement in the transition process.

General Discussion

The parents represented by this sample were generally those who might be characterized as "active," as all were involved in parents' groups to some extent (evidenced by the sample selection). Although more than one-third of parents were without programs, nearly two-thirds were involved or were anticipating involvement in some type of transition program. Significantly more parents wanted to be involved with the transition team and have an

Table 5

What Parents Are Willing to Do to Be Involved in Transition Programs (%)

	Group 1 (n=16)	Group 2 (n=22)	Group 3 (n=10)	Group 4 (n=29)
Attend weekly meetings	25.0	42.1	20.0	48.3
Attend monthly meetings	62.5	57.9	40.0	72.4
Take transition training	62.5	79.0	50.0	79.3
Solve logistical problems	43.8	57.9	40.0	43.8
Train other parents	56.3	73.7	90.0	51.7+
Participate in parent training group	50.0	73.7	70.0	65.5
Participate in parent support group	68.8	79.0	80.0	69.0
Leave everything up to the experts	6.2	0.0	10.0	0.0

+ = Significantly less than Group 3.

Group 1 = Will be involved in a transition program.
Group 2 = Currently involved in a transition program.
Group 3 = Have completed a transition program.
Group 4 = There is no transition program that I am aware of.

equal part in decision making than had the opportunity to do so. In fact, virtually all parents desired involvement. It is therefore the responsibility of the transition team to seek out parents and offer a range of involvement opportunities from which they can choose, acting with the assumption that parents generally do desire involvement. Parents also indicated that they had preferences for their child's postschool life, relating to not living at home, working in the community, and earning a wage equal to or greater than the minimum.

A great void remains, however, in the parent involvement literature; that is, little if any work has looked at how parent involvement affects outcomes. Questions need to be asked regarding whether (a) students whose parents were involved in their educational program achieve better, and (b) parent involvement in transition planning leads to a smoother transition to adult life, results in more options being offered to the transitioning individual, is correlated with maintained employment or higher status jobs, or results in better independent living options. Obviously there will be variability based upon what parents bring to the transition team and the abilities of their children; however, these questions need to be answered to support efforts aimed at facilitating parent involvement.

Note

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